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This paper explores the differing conceptions of knowledge held by tutors and students in work based learning (WBL) in UK universities and hypothesises that there are three broad yet distinct conceptions of knowledge based upon differing personal and professional ideologies. Within the University of Chester, where the author is a WBL tutor, there is explicit recognition between tutors that we all fall into one of two of these ideological camps. The two ideological positions are first that which can be characterised as ‘High or late modernist’ and second that which is more ‘Post-modernist’, with the former in the majority. There are also similar differences in the student body where particular groups, notably coaches, often have a distinctly post modern approach to knowledge. Experience beyond Chester suggests there is at least one other ideological position, at least among tutors, which can be described as ‘Modernist’.

For each ideological position the defining element is the conception of knowledge and the extent to which appropriate knowledge is held and defined by the academy. For the modernist WBL tutor the academy is still the primary repository of knowledge. Learning outcomes emphasise the importance of demonstrating understanding of accepted canons of theoretical knowledge. Practice knowledge (of students) is used in assignments to highlight and illuminate aspects of theory and is often used (by students) to validate actions and experience. For the late or high modernist the emphasis is more upon the primacy of experiential or tacit knowledge and the need to know in order to problem solve. The accepted canons of theoretical knowledge held by the academy are still important but the relationship with practice is different; the needs of practice for the learner determine the utility of accepted theoretical knowledge. Instead of validating practice theory is used (selectively) in order to re-interpret experience. The third position, the post modern places greater emphasis on the varieties of constructed experience and beliefs and regards knowledge as less differentiated by authority conferred by the academy. Instead learners are free to use whatever forms of knowledge they find useful and interesting, from whatever source. This may include forms of knowledge (such as NLP and alternative medicine) which the other two would regard as ‘unscientific’ and problematic in the context of higher education.

Each ideological position, whether knowingly or not exists in a different kind of relationship with the Enlightenment and its chief ideologue, Descartes (1996). His view that universal, objective truth can be identified by means of rational discourse and enquiry underpin our conception of the modern world. Tied up with this is the idea of progressive social development based upon increasing theoretical sophistication justified by experimental proof of the nature of reality. Various strands of this way of thinking have been the dominant mode of thinking in western societies since the seventeenth century, manifest in the steady advances in science and technology which have underlain progressive economic and social development. Western universities have played a crucial role in both upholding these values and generating new forms of knowledge to further our understanding of the world. The modernist conception of knowledge in work based learning regards the acquisition of universal, theoretically grounded and empirically tested knowledge as cumulatively progressive. Legitimate knowledge is seen as a transmission process by instructional means. Students of work based learning working within this knowledge framework are expected to be able to demonstrate familiarity with the ‘canon’ and demonstrate the validity and applicability of accumulated legitimised knowledge by reference to direct experience.

The late or high modernist conception of knowledge in WBL holds there has been a change in the 'grand narrative' so that the idea that progressive knowledge can be uncritically transmitted from the academy to the learner no longer holds. It is not so much that the idea of progressive knowledge is challenged as that it is thought to require extension and perhaps modification. Frameworks of knowledge within this ideological perspective can stress the importance of both individual and social learning, reflecting differing beliefs on the nature of societal change and the way in which learning occurs and/or is needed. These same differences of interpretation are evident among late modern theorists. Giddens (2008) for example stresses the rise of individualism in post industrial society creating a need for learning which emphasises the primacy of individual needs and experience. Others, such as Habermas (1981) dispute the notion of societal fracturing and emphasise the importance of 'communicative rationality' mediated through enduring social networks implying an emphasis instead upon collective, social learning. Within the context of broad narratives we can locate recent theories of knowledge and learning. Gibbons (1998) et al distinguish traditional conceptions of knowledge (Mode 1) which is universal, peer reviewed and subject discipline bound from Mode 2 knowledge which is required to meet specific, practical needs. Knowle's (1998) theory of adult learning emphasises the need of adults to construct their own learning which is directly relevant to their immediate need to know something. Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning stresses the importance of social learning in relation to the development of practice mastery. Reflective learning theorists such as Schon (1987), Mezirow (1981) and others (who usually assume individual learning) emphasise the importance of learning from lived experience. Acceptance of these theories does imply rejection of more traditional, formal conceptions of knowledge but recognise that its interpretation and application require modification. WBL tutors working within this ideological framework encourage the use of reflective models, such as Gibbs (1998) and Boud et al (1985) which advocate reading leading works as the basis for an internal dialogue with lived experience and prior beliefs. However learning outcomes emphasise the primacy of knowledge for action, situated in the workplace. WBL with this conception of knowledge is likely to focus on problem solving within a specific context, informed by a combination of personal experience and authoritative sources of knowledge, as determined by academy. The third ideological conception of knowledge in WBL starts from a different premise. Postmodernists thinkers argue that western societies in recent years have undergone such profound change that it is now impossible to believe in the Enlightenment project and the associated idea of social progress and advancing knowledge, at least of the social and human world (Lyotard 1984). For Derrida (1976) almost all our 'rational' assumptions and beliefs can be reduced to absurdity if we strip them to their essentials by means of 'deconstruction' of those narratives. According to Baudrillard (1994) it has become almost impossible for us to understand the world because of the powerful and misleading forces which shape our understanding such that our perception of our own lives becomes a simulation of reality- what he terms 'hyperreality'. According to this view we are unable to see beyond the constructed realities portrayed in the mass media, created to serve the interests of the powerful. A classic example of his analysis is his argument that the Gulf War did not take place- or rather some events occurred but our own understanding was shaped by a media narrative written before events actually occurred according to a 'script' which serves the interests of the most powerful interests in western society (Baudrillard 2000). For those in WBL who share this ideological position, experience, as created through personal narratives, can be endlessly constructed and de-constructed so that there is no end to interpretation and meaning and that what counts as 'knowledge' is equally a moveable feast. Post modernists in WBL accept the same theoretical developments in respect of knowledge and learning as late or high modernists. What they do not necessarily accept is the idea of the progressive canon

of knowledge to draw upon and inform experience. For the postmodernist in WBL knowledge is more directly gained from untrammelled experience alongside external knowledge created outside the academy. What counts as knowledge may be at once wider and narrower. It may be wider in that it can embrace forms of knowledge which lack formal theoretical statement and empirical verification (alongside more traditional 'academic' conceptions of knowledge) but for some it can be narrower as they may reject entirely knowledge of the traditional variety, characterising it as 'linear' and 'positivist'. The implications of different ideological frameworks and hence notion of relevant 'knowledge' in WBL are quite profound. Although there is an increasing body of literature about WBL there is no real agreement about what constitutes knowledge within it. This is often referred to by observers and researchers as 'differences in practice' but it is really a difference in a set of beliefs and attitudes about the world. These differences become manifest in a number of ways. They are revealed when for example, a tutor with one ideological perspective becomes an external examiner for a programme where another perspective is dominant. It is also manifest in differences between tutors where they may be genuine disagreement about what constitutes relevant and valid knowledge. These differences may not result in conflict and there may be a willingness to agree to differ. But problems can occur for students when they move from a tutor with one ideological perspective to one with another. An example of this is when students schooled in a modernist knowledge framework find it difficult to develop a problem solving focus when required to by a tutor with late modernist perspective. This can also happen with students who have experience of a conventional degree come on to a WBL programme. Conflict may also occur when students and tutors hold strongly held but differing ideological conceptions of knowledge. An engineer may find a postmodern tutor 'fluffy' whilst an NLP coach might think a modernist or late modern tutor lacks sympathy for their way of thinking. Finally it may be the case that these differences are not apparent to individuals or are only partially revealed. There is the irony that participants at WBL conferences engaged in dialogue may think they are discussing WBL but actually talking about entirely different things!

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